Introduction

In the wake of the school shooting in Parkland, Florida, that killed 17 people, the United States witnessed a surge in youth activism, civic engagement, and political participation related to gun violence and gun laws. Fueled by anger, loss, and grief, young people from Parkland sparked a nationwide movement: they took to the streets, met with elected officials, initiated petitions, and prompted a town hall aired on national television. On March 24, 2018, hundreds of thousands of youth gathered on the National Mall in Washington, DC, for the youth-led March for Our Lives. On the same day, hundreds of thousands more marched in 800 other cities across the country.

Young people have become a potent force in debates around guns and gun violence, illuminating the power of youth agency. How might classrooms be places that foster this kind of student agency? How might we design learning opportunities in which adolescents are not just encouraged, but also supported in using their voices for civic engagement and social change? In an effort to address these questions, one urban public high school implemented a yearlong youth participatory action research (YPAR) project.

YPAR is built on the idea that young people have the capacity to conduct research, generate new knowledge, and create social change. As a methodological stance and pedagogical approach, YPAR sees young people as thoughtful, agentive members of the community (Cammarata & Fine, 2008; Duncan-Andrade and Morrell, 2008; Mirra, Garcia, & Morrell, 2016). The associated projects cultivate youth agency from the very beginning, when adolescents are asked to identify the problems that face their schools and communities. In addition to beginning this project by honoring youth ideas about community issues, their ideas form the basis for their projects.

One aim of YPAR is for youth to see themselves as part of the broader research community and to contribute knowledge they generate by sharing research findings with relevant stakeholders. Existing research documents YPAR’s value in fostering youth civic engagement, research skill development, and voice (Cammarata & Fine, 2008; Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008; Mirra et al., 2016; Ozer & Wright 2012), yet the bulk of this work is situated in out-of-school, after-school, or elective class contexts. There is emerging research on school-based YPAR (Cammarata, 2016; Rubin, Ayala & Zaal, 2017), but given the lack of available sites, there remains limited research on YPAR that is embedded in the everyday curriculum for all enrolled students. The case presented in this article is unique in that all of the projects are part of students’ school life. Drawing on critical literacy (Christenson, 2009; Fecho, 2004) and practitioner inquiry (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Fecho, 2004) traditions and a belief in the potential of YPAR in school-based settings, this work aims to...
understand what happens when 100 young people are invited—as part of their daily school lives—to conduct original research related to community issues that they identify.

Enacting YPAR in School
This work is situated in a nonselective public high school in Cleveland, Ohio, that opened in fall 2017. Given the alignment between youth-led research and the school’s mission, the principal saw YPAR as a compelling start to a four-year progression of research courses. In order to be successful with the project, students were expected to complete all steps of the action research process. Working in small groups of three to five students, youth were invited to develop research questions, collect and analyze original data, present their findings, and take action steps to address the issue. Projects were diverse but could be sorted into three broad categories: community wellness/community building, health and wellness, and social justice. Topics included human trafficking, the gender pay gap, bullying of LQBTQ+ individuals, gang violence, teen stress, suicide/response to suicidal thoughts, displaced youth, quality of school lunch, and more.

Given the focus on identifying problems in their communities, a key part of this curriculum was ongoing investigation into social issues connected with power, bias, and inequity. Most weeks, students had one class period dedicated to YPAR every other day. The lessons, written by the assistant professor and facilitated by the five teachers, were organized by quarter. Quarter 1 focused on understanding YPAR as a research methodology, defining community, and identifying issues. By the end of Quarter 1, all students were expected to identify a research problem and one research question.

Quarter 2 was focused on research methods, with specific attention to identifying data sources. Students were introduced to field observations and questionnaires. Most students developed their questionnaires with an online application that streamlined distribution, follow-up, and collection. During Quarter 2, students initiated their data collection.

Quarter 3 was dedicated to data analysis and presentation of findings. All students were asked to write a conference proposal, roughly two pages, that met the requirements of an academic conference proposal. Students also completed a conference poster to be presented at the youth research conference at a local university. Facilitating, tracking, and workshopping with students around their analysis, proposals, and posters was a particularly demanding and challenging part of the process. Future enactments will require additional human resources.

Quarter 4 was reserved for students to determine an action step, based on their findings, that would address the problem they had examined. In contrast to the specificity of the outcomes for Quarter 3, there was much freedom and flexibility with the outcomes for Quarter 4. The teaching team discussed a range of possibilities, including a white paper, short video, public service announcement, organized march, and fundraising. The one requirement was that students would initiate some action before the end of the year.

What It Takes: Making YPAR “Work” in School
This YPAR curriculum required a variety of resources, although two resources stand out as particularly necessary to engage with an entire grade. The first resource is time. Although simple to name, educators know it is not simple to create. In order to implement this project, school leaders and/or department chairs must be willing to allocate specific time for the work. It does not have to happen daily, and it can take place in various places—homeroom, advisory, humanities block—but it does need to happen with some frequency. In this case, students engaged YPAR in the context of an advisory class, which typically met every other day for one class period.

The second critical resource is unwavering support and commitment from the entire school community. YPAR teachers must be invested in the goals of the project and prepared to cultivate a classroom space in which youth are able to take the lead on the work. They must also be prepared to navigate the uncertainty that comes with the development of students’ YPAR projects. The teachers must negotiate the individualized trajectory of each project based on the unique questions and dynamics of each group.
YPAR teachers and YPAR classrooms must be structured, yet flexible. Beyond the lead teachers, the entire school community must be invested in this work. In several projects, other members of the school community were instrumental in making connections with key stakeholders or, based on their expertise, helped students develop and distribute surveys. This whole-school commitment plays an important role in fostering a culture that honors original research and validates youth agency and youth voice.

Other resources included a clear system of organization and efforts to streamline support from the local university community. Although seemingly simple and perhaps obvious, in order to guide a broad and diverse collection of projects, the school needs one master spreadsheet that documents and tracks all of the projects. This system should clearly record each group’s topic and research question and track their progress toward major milestones. All members of the school community should be able to access this sheet with ease. This is important for ensuring that the community can support students. Along the way, the assistant professor worked to connect university faculty and undergraduate and graduate students with projects and organized the culminating conference at the university. In the context of this kind of university-school partnership, research collaboration positions the high school students not simply as beneficiaries of the university community, but as active contributors.

Cultivating Youth Agency
The youth agency fostered in and through this group of ninth graders’ engagement with YPAR was powerful because young people saw themselves as knowledgeable contributors to their local school and neighborhood communities. During the data analysis phase and preparation for the conference, the university educator reminded the ninth graders that they were the experts, particularly when they wanted to look to another resource for an answer: “What did you find? Remember, you are the only ones who collected this particular data. You have information that is not available anywhere else.

For Discussion . . .
How could teachers with fewer resources available still use a YPAR approach? Share your ideas! @NCTE_CEL #OctELQ

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**Question:**
How has bullying affected the lives of teens and young adults that are LGBT?

**The Need:**
- Our youth not able to express themselves safely
- We need to better understand the emotional & physical abuse of our LGBTQ teen & young adults community

**Facts:**
- Only 29% of respondents think society is tolerant of the LGBTQ community
- Schools are unsafe and unwelcoming for the majority of LGBT students.
- 65% of students who report being bullied feel unsafe at school
- 85% of students who report being bullied have experienced some type of social harm

**Data findings:**
We surveyed over 120 youth from various schools & colleges throughout Northeast Ohio

- 53% of survey responders state that it’s important to be open about your sexuality
- 46% of respondents recorded that they are comfortable being around people who don’t share the same sexual orientation as them

**Recommendations:**
1. Create support groups for LGBT student at local community centers and schools
2. Implement students led mentor programs between high school and middle school students that promotes positive social relations across all boundaries of difference.
3. Advocate for stricter enforcement of anti-bullying rules in schools

**Get Involved!**
- Social media
  #Supportive Community
  #CLEGAYPRIDE
- Volunteer
  - LGBT Center of Greater Cleveland
  - Cleveland Out and About
- Parents, families, and friends of lesbians and gays CLE (PFLAG)
- InterACT: Advocates for intersex youth
else.” She urged them to think about what they had learned that they really wanted other people to know. At the end of March, the students presented twenty-four original research projects as part of the first ever Campus Conference: A Youth Research Symposium at the local university. More than 200 people including university faculty, administration, and students, community members, school district personnel, K–12 students and teachers, and parents came to hear students share their findings. The figure on page 9 shows one group’s poster for the youth research symposium.

Beyond disseminating their findings at the conference, students used what they learned to take action. The final quarter was reserved for students to develop and implement an action step that would have an impact on the issue they had identified and studied. Here is a sampling of those.

A group who studied the challenges of being homeless in Cleveland learned from women at a local shelter that the surrounding streets were not particularly safe or welcoming. These students partnered with a local community organization and residents from the women’s shelter to discuss how to improve street conditions. With the information from their observations and focus groups, they created a crowdfunding video to raise funds for street improvement.

A group who examined young people’s perceptions of individuals who are LGBTQ+ were discouraged when survey results revealed so many negative attitudes about LGBTQ+ students. Connecting this to a lack of awareness and support, members of the group created a queer-straight alliance at their school.

A group that studied teaching styles in elementary school found a need for more interactive, small-group instruction. They arranged time to lead small groups at the feeder elementary school.

A student who studied teens’ thoughts on racism worked to create a video, using footage from her interviews with young people, to raise awareness about how Cleveland youth think about racism at this historical moment, with specific attention to the debate around taking a knee during the national anthem in athletic competitions.

There was extensive discussion with the teaching team about what counts as change and the extent to which awareness building constitutes “action.” Agreement about how to assess “action” will be an ongoing conversation, particularly as it is tied to complicated questions including, How do we evaluate and measure student agency? How do we gauge what “counts” as change?

**Role Negotiation**

YPAR cultivates student agency related to civic engagement and social change and also related to building specific skills needed to do activist-oriented work. This work is messy and far from seamless. Students encountered various challenges along the way, all of which contributed to agency building. How do students cope with low response rates? What happens when you are studying teen girls’ thoughts on stress and the focal participants who show up are all men? What happens when a team member is repeatedly absent? To be successful, students had to learn how to navigate such challenges. They also learned a collection of important agency-building skills, including connecting with key stakeholders about an issue, asking questions that generate the information you need, following up when no one responds to your survey, researching ways to interpret data, and presenting research findings in different formats to different audiences. Students were instinctively motivated when survey responses came in, when they saw a pattern emerge in their analysis, and, most powerfully, when they realized their capacity to initiate an action like raising funds to improve the quality of a street or creating a new student organization for the high school community.

The role of the teacher is a unique challenge with YPAR. By design, YPAR is a form of grassroots community organizing. As such, it is not a perfect match for some of the more rigid systems and structures that are part of schooling today. The teacher’s role is to be a lead facilitator and guide for all of the projects in their student group or advisory, but they are also an idea generator, resource connector, curator, and all-around hustler. The role must necessarily remain flexible, as the specific requirements will be tied directly to the types of projects that students initiate and the interests and dispositions of the students in each research group.

**LEARN MORE ABOUT . . .**

Skills for Collaboration
https://www.risebeyond.org/6-skills-needed-for-effective-collaboration/

Deepening Student Collaboration
https://www.edutopia.org/article/5-strategies-deepen-student-collaboration-mary-burns

Team Collaboration
https://www.forbes.com/sites/forbescoachescouncil/2017/06/22/improve-team-collaboration-with-these-key-skills
**Discussion and Implications**

In the short term, YPAR helps to enhance student engagement in the community. By integrating this work in school, it also has potential to increase students’ engagement in their own schooling. YPAR creates room in school-sanctioned curricula for youth to participate in social justice work. At this historical cultural moment, YPAR resonates with the youth movements that have erupted around #BlackLivesMatter and gun violence. Instead of seeing the young people who are advocating for change in those movements as an exception, this approach encourages all youth to see themselves as capable change agents and fosters various capabilities for creating that change.

In the long term, YPAR is intended to develop youth who are civic minded. As community members witness young people taking action in response to some of the most pressing problems in their schools and neighborhoods, community leadership roles should be made available to them. In 2018, a Cleveland city council representative invited students to join one of his advisory committees, and another young person was awarded a role with one of the city’s most active spaces for civic engagement and dialogue. In addition, the action steps that students take should, ultimately, lead to healthier, more positive school environments, which lead to improved attendance and student graduation rates. Young people who are invited to engage using YPAR have the chance to leave high school understanding and experiencing the concept of shared ownership for and responsibility to their community. They also learn that, on a fundamental level, changes in a community cannot come strictly from outside. Community members must play a role in trying to understand and develop ways to mitigate the problem at hand.

**Thoughts Moving Forward**

In order to gain a better understanding of the potential of YPAR in school and implications for youth civic engagement, the work shared in this article has led to a larger inquiry into the design, implementation, and enactment of YPAR as part of the curriculum for these students and teachers. Building on current work, the larger study aims to understand what YPAR means for literacy learning, with attention paid to civic engagement, research skill development, and the challenges of assessing the collaborative, open-ended, and iterative practices central to action research. In order for more schools to embrace YPAR, additional evidence is needed for how we define and assess the literacies and learning tied to this work. Another central focus for this collaborative project is understanding how action and/or change should be measured when we think about a successful YPAR project. This work aims to contribute additional insights on the potential of YPAR to expand adolescents’ literacies, position students’ as researchers and community leaders, and revitalize current approaches to high school research. As we confront persistent social injustices and young people continue to position themselves as change agents, school-based YPAR offers youth a powerful way to leverage their voices for social change and, simultaneously, develop their technical capabilities as researchers, writers, and civic leaders.

**References**


JOIN THE CONVERSATION! Molly Buckley-Marudas